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John Ivison: Tories across the nation confident, prepared for battle in a fall election

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Body

It's said that if a nation ceases to believe it can win the war, the war is lost.

If you accept the raft of new polls that suggest a Liberal landslide is as certain as thunder after lightning, the war is over before a shot has been fired.

Three recent opinion surveys put the governing party between 12 and 14 points ahead.

Yet the dozen Conservative MPs I spoke to this week are not losing their heads.

It may be that they haven't grasped the problem. It may be that they were putting on a brave face for a reporter (though they all spoke on background so they could speak freely, and none are afraid to voice their grievances.)

But the sense I am left with is that this is not a party in panic mode. Rather, it is one that believes it can give Justin Trudeau a bloody nose if he calls an election for which there is little justification, other than favourable polling numbers.

Most of the MPs were realistic - a victory is a long-shot. But there is a belief that they can deny Trudeau his majority.

"It's summer, vaccines are finally here, things are opening up and people are feeling good. They're getting 24 hours a day of Justin trotting out of his cottage, which is using up all the air in the room. But I don't believe the **doom** and gloom. I'm out door-knocking and I'm hearing the same things I heard in 2019 - we've got to get rid of Trudeau," said one Western MP.

That feeling is not held universally.

John Ivison: With Conservatives down in the polls, Erin O'Toole faced with a brave choice(
<https://nationalpost.com/opinion/john-ivison-with-conservatives-down-in-the-polls-erin-otoole-faced-with-a-brave-choice>)

John Ivison: Who Trudeau is really afraid of as he looks at calling a fall election(
<https://nationalpost.com/opinion/john-ivison-who-trudeau-is-really-afraid-of-as-he-looks-at-calling-a-fall-election>)

A gloom has set in with some Conservative operatives, particularly in Ontario, who think things are going to get worse and the party might lose 40 seats in a fall election.

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Conservative leader Erin O'Toole is increasingly portrayed as a loser, written off by pundits and pollsters. "It is hard to imagine that (O'Toole) can challenge for the top job. If anything (NDP leader) Jagmeet Singh is the wildcard," said David Coletto, CEO of Abacus Data.

But that defeatism has not spread to the people with most to lose from a Conservative meltdown - its members of parliament.

"Let's not kid ourselves, it's a narrow path (to victory)," said one Ontario MP. "Obviously the Liberals are in a better position than we are. But to me it feels a lot like 2005. The feeling in the fall (when the Conservatives trailed the Liberals by 10 points in most polls) was that Paul Martin was going to steamroller us. There was a full panic going on and I remember people telling me we should dump the leader (Stephen Harper)."

But we won. The election campaign made the difference."

Another MP said a former prime minister told him to stop looking at polls and listening to pundits. "He said it all happens in a 36-day period and you can easily come back from any polling deficit."

There are stark differences of course. Martin was weighed down by 12 years of Liberal government and the sponsorship scandal. "It will be only six years in the fall, so it's pretty early for a change," conceded the Ontario MP. Neither the SNC-Lavalin affair nor the WE Charity saga have the power to shift votes in the same way as the sponsorship scandal. As I said last week, opposition parties rarely unseat governments in this country unless they have been in power too long, are irrefutably incompetent or demonstrably corrupt. There is very little in the public domain to suggest voters are reaching for pitchforks and torches.

The prime minister is on a taxpayer-funded pre-campaign tour of the country, making funding announcements. As one Conservative MP noted: "It's hard to campaign against cash."

Yet Conservative MPs across the country profess themselves relaxed and confident that a wipe-out is not on the cards.

Just as Harper matched Liberal policy on health care and official languages, so O'Toole has tried to take **climate** change and some social conservative issues off the table ahead of an election.

Those changes were not universally popular in caucus and it is more likely than not that a candidate will repudiate official policy mid-campaign. One of the party's more progressive MPs lamented the stance of some less enlightened colleagues. "People do care about First Nation reconciliation, gay rights and affordable childcare. The debate about whether they are issues is over. But half of our caucus doesn't understand that. What are our policies to respond to those issues?"

The leader's attempts to moderate positions that turned off voters in central Canada in 2019 have not registered in public opinion polling, which suggest Trudeau is twice as popular as O'Toole when it comes to their preferred prime minister.

But the reality is the man who was elected leader in the middle of a pandemic and has been unable to introduce himself to Canadians across the country is more unrecognized than unpopular.

"In a campaign, the Canadian public will be exposed to Erin in a meaningful way for the first time. It is an opportunity for him to come on strong. But do we have enough time?" asked one MP.

Caucus members are confident that he will make fewer mistakes than his predecessor, Andrew Scheer, who had trouble answering questions around his own social conservatism in 2019.

"O'Toole is not going to scare people away, which helps the NDP," said one Western MP, who said he supports the changes the leader has made. "You have to adapt and be relevant. You've got to keep asking yourself: 'What does your customer want?'"

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Even members of O'Toole's caucus who are indifferent to his charms think he is a decent, hard-working man who is quick on his feet and will likely perform well in the leaders' debates. Trudeau has sold many Canadians on his plan for the future and portrayed his critics as cynics who are indifferent to the well-being of the marginalized communities. But the need for the \$100 billion in fiscal stimulus unveiled in the spring budget is far from settled. The economy has rebounded much more strongly than anticipated and employment is likely to reach pre-COVID levels, once the accommodation, food services and recreation industries re-open. As economist Trevor Tombe said this week in an article for The Hub website, "the macroeconomic case for higher spending is significantly weaker (than in April). Stimulus may no longer be needed."

O'Toole must stoke a desire for change but also present his Conservative Party as the agents of that change.

That is going to be a tall order.

There are signs of voter volatility. Recent polls indicate that nearly three in four voters are not as wedded to the idea of another Trudeau majority as the prime minister is.

An Abacus Data poll this week said the intensity of the desire for change is more muted than in 2019, but 40 per cent say it is definitely time for a new government, and another 29 per cent are open to the idea, saying they would prefer a change but don't feel that strongly about it. It is the second part of the equation that may prove more insuperable. The same poll said only four in 10 voters would even consider voting Conservative.

O'Toole not only needs to motivate his voting base, he needs to expand it - the political equivalent of sucking and blowing at the same time.

MPs say that the campaign will not simply focus on Trudeau and his shortcomings. "We're not going to re-litigate the pandemic - it won't be 'we shoulda, coulda, woulda'. It will be forward-looking," said one senior Conservative.

O'Toole has already put out his five point recovery plan - jobs, accountability, mental health, emergency preparedness and controlled spending - which indicate his priorities, if not his policies. "People are starting to focus on longer-term economic recovery and they want to know what the future looks like. 'Build back better' isn't a strategy. People want to know: 'where are the jobs, what sectors are they in and how much will they pay?'" We're going to have to differentiate how we are going to grow the economy," said one MP.

The upside about low expectations is that it should be simple for O'Toole to exceed them. In the 2015 campaign, Harper's spin-doctor Kory Teneycke said Trudeau would outperform if he appeared on the stage for the leaders' debate with his pants on. The Liberal leader was able to use an energetic debate performance as a launch pad to power. Similarly, O'Toole may find subterranean expectations work in his favour. It may well deprive the Liberals of the customary strategy of demonizing the Conservative leader to persuade NDP-Liberal swing voters to hold their nose and vote Liberal. That tactic only works if New Democrats believe O'Toole might win the election.

It is entirely possible that it is a strong NDP showing that deprives Trudeau of his majority - a result that many Conservatives would privately consider a victory.

The only certainty at this point is that all the parties are flying blind when it comes to the real mood in the country. Are buoyant Liberal polling numbers based on post-pandemic euphoria that might go flat, like Champagne left out overnight? Or has Trudeau tapped into the spirit of the times, a development that might threaten the Conservatives' status as the Official Opposition in the House of Commons?

It looks like we are set to find out before the leaves fall.

jivison@postmedia.com (jivison@postmedia.com)

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